

TOWN of WESTON, CONNECTICUT



Incorporated 1787

Office of the First Selectman

TO: Board of Selectmen
FROM: Gayle Weinstein *gw*
SUBJECT: First Selectman's Recommended Budget
DATE: January 30, 2014

For the first time in five years, I am not beginning this conveyance letter with doom and gloom. Home sales, conveyance fees and building permits are all on the rise, indicating that Weston has begun the process of economic recovery. Additionally, increases in the rate of grand list growth (.84%) and non- grand list revenues (\$60,200) are small but positive signs for the financial health of the community.

As this process began, I had hoped that this budget cycle would afford us the opportunity to restore some of the service reductions and deferred initiatives that had been imposed on the budget over the past five years. Submitted requests by department heads reflect the extent of past staff reductions and equipment deferrals. Fully funding those requests would result in an operating budget increase of more than 6%. While this budget does not include all the new initiatives that I would have liked, I believe it balances the needs of our community with the desire to be fiscally prudent

OPERATING BUDGET

I am recommending a Town Operating Budget of \$12,083,386 for the Fiscal Year of 2014-15. This represents a \$369,945 (3.16%) increase over the current year.

THE BUDGET DRIVERS

Keeping pace with the annual increases in the salary, pension, health insurance, social security, and workers compensation categories will require \$256,000. Police, Fire, and the Communications Center increases claim another \$71,256. The total increase to meet all additional needs is \$42,689.

RESTORATION

Westport Weston Health District (\$15,110) Subject to concurrence by the Town of Westport, the Health District budget includes restoration of a staff sanitarian. This will allow better service to Weston residents wanting building permits or needing help with septic system or well issues. It will also allow the District to provide some additional services to the Town that we would otherwise have to complete by outside service contract. The need for this addition of staff is driven partially by the increase in Land Use activity described below.

Land Use Hours (\$12,046) Three years ago, the Town reduced all Land Use personnel to a four day week in response to a dramatic drop in building and land development activities. That department has shown a steady increase in activity, which justifies adding a half day Friday to the Building Inspector's week, as well as three hours per week to the Land Use Director's hours (increased from 20 to 23). The cost of these additions will be offset by increases in building fee and application revenue resulting from the increased activity. Activities for other personnel have not increased to the point of necessitating additional hours, but I will continue to monitor the department to determine when future adjustments might also be necessary.

Library (\$5,000) This budget restores the Library's book purchasing account to the level it was in FY 2009-2010 (\$50,000). The electronic book lending program has become a fast growing and popular service. Although favored by seniors because of the ability to increase font size, e-books are also extensively enjoyed by commuters and travelers. Typically, those residents have been underserved due to our reduced library hours during the week. As the Library Trustees explore how to best utilize the proceeds of the Vitale bequest to reshape their program and facilities, I think it is important for us to maintain contact with that expanded user base. Building the e-book program will help us do that effectively.

NEW INITIATIVES

While being mindful of the budget, there are some modest new initiatives I am proposing. The majority involve technology upgrades

Town email addresses for elected and appointed Board members (\$3,700) Any email that involves Town business is subject to the Freedom of Information Act. In order to offer some protection to those who serve, I am recommending the use of Town emails to prevent personal email accounts from being subject to inspection.

Voice over IP phone system (Neutral to Operating budget) The existing phone system for the Town and Schools is antiquated, and will no longer be serviced after April 1st. With a Capital budget request, we will be replacing all handsets. The operating cost should be essentially neutral for the town and a decrease for the Schools.

Communications Software (\$8,200 in Capital Budget) Currently, Police, Fire and EMS all operate with different systems, necessitating our dispatchers to fill out multiple screens with the same information. This software will unify and simplify that process.

Single Stream Recycling (cost savings) With the introduction of single stream recycling, residents will be able to comingle all items that are recyclable, such as paper, glass, cans, etc. We believe this will lead to a greater amount of recycling (which we get paid for) and less garbage (which costs us money to be hauled away.)

DEBT SERVICE

Total debt and interest payments for all Town and School purposes for the coming fiscal year totals \$6,487,869, a decrease of \$66,763 as compared to the current year.

This payment is 89% attributable to school projects, and 11% to the Town. Debt and interest payments will comprise 9.6% of the total fiscal year 2014-15 budget expenditures if budgets are approved as currently presented.

CAPITAL BUDGET

After offsetting revenues are considered, the overall capital budget for all categories increases by \$145,517 - from \$1,116,228 in FY2013-14 to a recommended \$1,261,745 next year.

The capital budget contains three areas of appropriation: Town items, School items, and shared items. From year to year, the Town requested items are down from \$708,000 to \$642,000. School items are increased from \$395,000 to \$477,000, and the cost of shared items is up from \$25,000 to \$153,000. The inclusion of a new telephone system for all school and town buildings is the reason for the increase in this category.

REVENUES and MILL RATE

The FY2014-15 budgets as conveyed here would increase the equalized mill rate by 2.85% to \$28.29.

Year to year comparisons are difficult in a revaluation year, as the value changes do not tell the complete story. A property revaluation is a revenue neutral event, as it does not in itself result in any more or less tax revenue being raised. However, the total decrease in property values will adjust the mill rate upward. The current year mill rate is \$23.89. If the mill rate for the current FY2013-14 budget was calculated with the new values, that \$23.89 rate would be \$27.28, but the amount collected would not change.

Overall, the source of Town revenues in this budget reflects our historic pattern of approximately 90% from property taxes, 4% from personal property taxes (primarily vehicles), and 6% from all other sources (grants, fees, state aid, interest income). This budget does not change any assumptions in our collection or abatement rates. The Board of Finance will evaluate those at the time it sets the mill rate.

TOTAL TOWN BUDGET

I am requesting a Total Town budget, including Town Operating, Town and Shared Capital, and Debt Service of \$13,570,261. This represents an increase of \$428,968 (3.26%) over the current year.

This budget will allow the Town of Weston to maintain and restore necessary Town services, address public safety issues, and move forward with some modest new initiatives. I believe it is fiscally responsible and reflects our community values. Therefore, I ask for your full support of this budget as presented.